

ANTIQUUE MAN



By Sean Ryan



The world creaked around his backdoor home. The four windowless walls showed their dirty, depressed faces to the sun. Outside, the building looked quiet. The lack of life was almost as conspicuous as the lack of a door. The flat roof gave the forsaken building an unnatural appearance. Brownish paint turned pea green covered the cracking walls like cheap make-up. Some had flaked off and blown away with the wind like dead leaves. The yard's grass was long decayed; now a field of dusty, hard brown clay was the ground.

Inside the darkness of the shadowless box waited the antique man. His wire bones and yarn muscles were lounging on a chair of squeaky leather padding. He watched his index fingers twitch up to down, down to up, rhythmically slapping the leather. Breathing caused his vocal cords to chafe, and a wheezing whine spread from his throat to the four walls. The wheeze caused his neck to itch as if a family of spiders were frolicking in his throat. Under grimy hair that stuck to his head in long white clumps, some hair-dwelling critter danced on his wrinkled skull skin.

The room was chilly, like fall nights, and dim like the inside of a soda can. Ceaseless, slow vibrations whispered from the darkness in front of the antique man. In the corner a tired wind-up generator turned and softly rumbled on the floor. It could supply about eight hours of power before needing to be re cranked. Above the generator on the wall hummed the oxidizer; it added oxygen to the air while removing carbon dioxide. It was powered by the slow generator and worked sluggishly, so the room was constantly stuffy.

Rotten-potato smells misted from the walls. Other than the generator and oxidizer, there were no sounds, for the outside was vacant and the walls were lined with lead. The antique man was unfeeling in his synthetic womb. His crinkled dry nose did not sense the stench. His skin's nerves felt not the chilly wires of cold that poked through his clothing.

Daylight had long been banished from the room. Neglected light fixtures hung from the ceiling, dead. A metallic green light spewed from a computer screen that was planted on the floor, facing the antique man. He couldn't look directly into the green because it made his eyes shrivel and cringe. A black cord ran from the screen to a large computer in the corner. A wide keyboard sat on the floor in front of his chair. In the haze of the green screen a leafless plant sagged in a jar of hard dirt. The plant had with-

ered soon after the antique man stopped using the lights. Its leaves were long fallen, their brown remains like charred bodies in the dirt around the stem. It too would fall soon.

A dull ache in the old man's flesh made him realize it was feeding time. He leaned forward and reached under his chair. Grabbing the pistol-shaped feeder, he fell back into the accepting leather. The feeder was a pneumatic injecting device that sprayed the man's nourishment through the pores of his pale skin. A thick, phlegm-colored cocktail, the juice offered everything needed to survive. A gigantic tank of this wonder juice was buried underground. The old man pointed the feeder at his arm and pulled the trigger. Painless and tasteless, the fluid entered like a cool breeze.

Some of the room's odor seeped from the old man himself; some flowed from the lab behind him. A tired lab table stood there, encircled by cabinets. Behind the stiff hinges of the closed cabinet doors were books, jars, scopes and samples. Chipped and cracked dishes brimmed with thriving mold. Tests once performed on the table were no longer possible due to the death of all the rats and the decay of all the samples.

Most of the odor came from the remains of Garrity, his deceased colleague.

A good man, Garrity. The antique man had known him even before they were boxed together, like a pair of sneakers. They'd gotten along fine the first two years. But toward the end of the second year, the isolation made Garrity go insane. He stopped using the excretion funnels, foamed, ranted nonstop, and smashed some of the lab equipment. He flapped his limbs around in the out-of-control flings of a beached gamefish. But his fits and stinky messes weren't the worst. His laughing was the worst.

Near the end, Garrity had begun laughing uncontrollably. Without cause, vomiting peals of sick laughter would shoot from his reeking mouth. These cracked fits would last until Garrity's vocal cords were scoured to silence. Once they healed enough to work, Garrity would laugh more until they gave out again. Garrity, in his madness, had stopped injecting himself with the wonder juice. The antique man had tried to make him, but Garrity fought him off. He died in the middle of one of his laughing fits. The antique man respectfully wrapped the remains and gently laid them to rest in the farthest corner of the room. There was no longer much difference between the antique man's flesh and Garrity's. The old man wasn't sure how long Garrity had been dead, just that it was a long time.

The man's eyes jumped up from the memory as the green light vanished and the room went black. Sliding along the floor, his fingers brushed a stick of chalk and

struck out at it eagerly. Then the man brought his legs up off the floor and drew his arms around his knees. Rocking like an infant and gripping the chalk in a white-knuckled fist, the antique man stared straight ahead as the screen turned a deep shade of blue. Against that blue, a series of black numbers appeared.

Spittle trailed from the corners of his mouth as the antique man cracked a smile. He rubbed the drool onto his shoulder and rose to unsure feet. Crunching dead leaves and debris under his feet, he proceeded forward until his nose was inches from the wall. On that wall were digits, letters, and random-looking icons chalked in blue. Each was exactly one inch tall and written with the dearest of care. The wall was lined with them from ceiling to floor, from left to right.

The antique man smiled at his mural. He had covered three of the four walls like this. Ceiling to floor, left to right, with one-inch-tall figures.

He turned away, groping in the inky darkness for the ladder he had mounted on the wall. Slowly, painfully, the skeletal figure ascended until his head was a foot from the ceiling. He reached up a bony arm and, with the stalk of chalk, began to write. With precision and love, he entered more numbers, then brought his arm down and smiled. All told, he had written over two million figures on the walls (he had counted them once). They expressed a molecular sequence, a juxtaposition of chemical elements that only he could comprehend.

The antique man brought his feet down the ladder rung by rung. He had fallen once. His ankle had broken and he was forced to the limits of his endurance to stay mobile. The knowledge that outsiders were dying kept him from listening to his ankle scream as the bones crunched. He had mended slowly and now his foot was

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turned to one side, requiring him to walk on the inside sole of that foot. It pained him always but his duty left no time for pain.

The chair's padding gave easily as the antique man sat back down. The computer screen was back to green. He recalled his cause. The dying never knew he existed at all. No doubt many of the living had forgotten him



completely by now. In time, when he reemerged, he would find out.

The virus had started in Africa, as had all the others. America held its breath as the disease spread quickly, from the Mediterranean coast all the way up to Iceland. Hospitals never grew crowded because the virus killed within hours. Men and women walked in with headaches and were wheeled out with mush brains. Morgues shut down as morticians caught it from the bodies and died. Governments sent in men with protective suits to cremate the corpses in factory furnaces. Doctors in Europe all died before they could formulate a cure.

After the first week of European horrors, America

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closed her borders. American scientists had a corpse sent to a remote island for study under heavy, heavy security. After three days of research three of the eight scientists had headaches. Four days later the island stopped sending radio transmissions. Nobody dared go there to check.

Next, the invisible army invaded Asia. Then it turned and swarmed toward America. Soon after the first few outbreaks were discovered in California, the state was ordered closed by the US government. Cold-eyed snipers lined its border to stop people—and the virus—from getting out. But it did get out. Viruses know no borders.

As a desperate last resort, the government started Operation Lead Box. Before they died, the island scientists had proved that three or more feet of lead could stop the advance of the virus. So twenty or thirty of the best and brightest scientists were selected and sent to various remote regions that were still relatively safe. The scientists were sealed in heavy lead boxes equipped with supercomputers, labs, and all known data about the virus. Two scientists to a box.

At first the scientists had communicated through their computers, which were networked by satellite. The antique man hadn't contacted the other scientists very often, but Garrity had. Most seemed to have had their own pet theories, and thought the other scientists' ideas were preposterous. But they always asked ques-

tions and replied to Garrity's inquiries. After Garrity died, the antique man still had an occasional transmission. They stopped in the third year. After that, the old man stopped sending and receiving inquiries. He was alone.

He *almost* had the cure! The sequences of figures on the wall were starting to converge and reveal a pattern for a compound. It was a compound that could easily be made and would probably work. He didn't know for sure because he didn't have organisms to test the compound on, or materials to make it with. But he knew he was close, close enough to strangle the elusive virus. He was almost ready to sound his call and return to the world. Almost.

Maybe the cure had already been found and they hadn't let his colleagues out. Or maybe everyone else inside and out was dead. Either way, the antique man had no choice but to keep calculating until the figures disclosed a definite, beyond-all-doubt solution. What else was there to do?

Suddenly, chaos! The old man and his room lurched and shook. A massive roar like the scoldings of demons bombed the room.

The antique man's eyes vibrated around. His weak fingers and arms shook stiffly. His lips were parted, and he started breathing heavily through his soft teeth. Hobbling mindlessly from wall to wall, toenails clickety-clicking against the floor, he felt his brain collapse upon itself. Silvery spots appeared before his eyes. The room became still.

Outside, the rumbling bass boomed again against the lefthand wall. The heavy wall would not give easily. What devil on earth had found him and was savaging his home? BANG! The room quaked as the wall rattled but stood firm. The lab glassware jingled sharply. The generator started rocking.

This couldn't be the end—he wasn't done yet!

The antique man's body continued to quiver. His weak hands flailed randomly at his head and ripped out bits of spiderweb hair. The boom sounded again, its impact tossing him to the floor. Vials and test tubes jumped off the table and were bashed to bits, raining on the antique man's body. He screamed in pain and his throat gave way. Now silenced, only foul blasts of air proceeded from the stripped vocal cords.

The booming blast returned, and this time the antique man heard the wall crack. A reluctant tearing sound struck his ears as the oxidizer dropped from the wall. It bounced rudely off the generator, bashed the computer and crashed to the floor. The computer was flattened. The screen went dead and the room plunged into total blackness.

The antique man regained his footing and forced



his body to move as far from the crumbling wall as possible. Sightless, he lurched forward and fell, his shins hitting solidly against the metal frame of the smashed monitor. The skin tore roughly and the antique man began to bleed. His eyes roamed wildly as he willed himself to crawl over blood and wires. He slapped the dead stem and pot out of his way and scraped his arms as he crawled over small fallen branches.

His head rocked roughly against the opposite wall when he finally reached it. Curling up next to Garrity's wrapped remains, he held himself together, awaiting the next blow. The wall took another hit and was now on the verge of collapse. The antique man closed his eyes to the pain and pressed tightly against Garrity.

The wall was struck again and pieces of lead gave way. The neatly ordered figures written on the wall fell randomly to the ground. The cracks grew and light began to pour in through them. Cold sweat dotted

his paper-thin skin as the antique man squeezed his eyes tightly shut.

Brutally savaged a sixth and final time, the wall gave in. Boulders of lead rolled out and broke apart on the floor. The fragile figures and icons written on the wall were scattered and broken. And for the first time in years, daylight entered the man's eyes. Blinded by the

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light, the ancient man was yet able to hear the heavy footsteps and feel the soft hands on his back. Voices shouted *Hurry!* and *Help!*, and whispers in the antique man's ears asked simple questions. His torn throat could not respond, though the answers were clear in his head. He uncovered his eyes and saw nothing but yellow-white mist with black blurry forms of men.

He was lifted slowly onto a soft warm mattress. He could feel himself being carried somewhere. Voices around him spoke in a dialect he didn't understand. He could not open his eyes all the way to see who or where he was. He felt his mattress being lifted higher, and then two heavy slams at his feet. Then it was dim again.

He opened his eyes and saw men in saintly white uniforms washing his cuts and tending to other wounds. All had contorted faces that looked troubled and sick. The antique man realized with urgency that he must tell these people what he had discovered. Without his help they would never decipher the compound on the two remaining walls. He had to tell them how to read his language! It was time to reemerge and conquer the invisible army! He opened his mouth to speak . . . and air passed silently through his throat. He remembered the final scream that had silenced his voice. His eyes grew wide and he tried to rock his body to gain the attention of the attendants around him. His chest seized and spasmed and he heard a whine in his right ear. The men with him looked up and jumped into action.

At last, the antique man released a long breath. His toes were numb; his fingers would not respond. His heart was not beating steadily as it had before. His body shook and grew cold. The antique man smiled bitterly. Then it was black again, glorious black. ★

Oatmeal by Twilight

Once upon a time
summer meant lingering nights
and firefly chases,
darting across the yard with perforated jars
while the lazy bugs treaded the balmy air,
tickling our bare shoulders,
bobbing about our chlorine heads.

Our nights were naps
mingled with black-and-white reruns
that were soothingly loud,
lulling us to sleep before we soon woke
to make oatmeal by twilight.

Feet made a friendly stick-and-peel sound
on the kitchen floor,
and I could still taste unfamiliar toothpaste
as we readied our ingredients,
two serious chefs
in lace-trimmed nightgowns.

Our porridge condensed
and we poked our heads out the window,
stared at the rouge sky,
marveled at the silent world
and basked in the satisfaction
of making oatmeal by twilight.

—Veronica Meewes,
Tenth grade, Northern Valley Regional High School,
Demarest, New Jersey

